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The Earliest Explorers

Before the days of Leif Ericson and Christopher Columbus, there were many important explorers of great courage. Following are three that have recorded explorations in the years B.C. and a fourth man who was born in the fourth century A.D. Understandably, details of their lives including exact dates are not available, but these people and their accomplishments are still worth noting.



Hannu

The first explorer

 **2750 B.C.:** Hannu (sometimes spelled *Hennu*), an Egyptian, made an expedition to the limits of the known world. He traveled to the region at the southeastern end of the Red Sea. At the time, it was known as the land of Punt. Today it is part of modern Ethiopia and Somalia.


Hannu returned home with great riches in wood, myrrh and precious metals. He left a record of his adventures carved in rock.



Hanno

The first explorer in western Africa

530-470 B.C.

 **500 B.C.:** Hanno was a navigator from Carthage. About 500 B.C., he set out as the head of a large expedition to colonize Africa and start cities. It is said that he had 60 ships, each driven by 50 oars and that he started with 30,000 men and women. He took a route along the west coast of Africa. He probably sailed as far as the present-day Sierra Leone. He left some people at each place he stopped so they could begin new settlements.


When he returned to Carthage, he recorded an account of his travels on a tablet that he placed inside the temple of the Phoenician god, Moloch. The original story was written in the Phoenician language. A Greek translation exists under the title *Periplus*, which means “voyage.”

Pytheas

Greek mathematician, astronomer and explorer

???-300 B.C.*

*Sources differ on exact dates in the life of this explorer.

 **325 B.C.:** Pytheas undertook a great voyage, sailing westward beyond the Mediterranean Sea. He became the first Greek to visit Britain and the Atlantic coast of Europe. He left from his hometown of Massalía. (The city is now Marseille, France, but at that time the region was a Greek colony.) Pytheas sailed around the coast of Spain and through the Strait of Gibraltar. He had to avoid blockades put up by the Carthaginians, who were trying to monopolize all the trade in the Atlantic. Pytheas continued north along the coasts of Portugal, Spain and France. He crossed the English Channel. He continued up the west coast of Britain and landed at many places. He

observed the mining and smelting of tin, the threshing of wheat and other things that were new to him.


In northern Britain, Pytheas learned of an island called Thule. It was a six-day trip to sail there. He was told it was the most northerly inhabited land, where it was daylight all the time in the summer. This could have been Iceland, but more likely it was part of Norway. It is not known if Pytheas actually sailed to Thule or not. But he did correctly describe floating discs of ice in the Arctic Sea, which would not have been known to sailors in the Mediterranean.

Fa-hsien or Faxian


Chinese Buddhist monk


???-414 A.D.*

*Sources differ on exact dates in the life of this explorer.

 **399 A.D.:** Fa-hsien crossed Central Asia and headed to India. His goal was to visit the homeland of Buddhism. He was born in Shansi, China, although no date is given for his birth.

Fa-hsien traveled to Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and continued his studies for two years.

 **402:** After the three-year journey, Fa-hsien arrived in northwestern India. He visited sites important to the life of Buddha. He studied extensively the early writings of his religion.

 **414:** Fa-hsien returned to China and translated the Buddhist writings into Chinese. The record of his travels, *Record of Buddhist Kingdoms*, contains important descriptions of India in the early A.D. 400s.



Eric the Red

Viking explorer who colonized Greenland

950-1002 A.D.*

*Sources differ on exact dates in the life of this explorer.

Note: Two Icelandic *sagas*, or long heroic tales, tell the story of the Vikings' discovery and attempted colonization of North America 500 years before Columbus sailed to the New World. The biographies of Eric the Red, Leif Ericson and Gudridur Thorbjarnardottir are based partially on these sagas.



950 A.D.: Eric was born in Jaeren, Norway. His name was Eric Thorvaldson, but he was called Eric the Red because of his red hair.



960: Eric's father was exiled from Norway for murdering a man. Eric left Norway with him. The family settled in Iceland.



980: Eric's second son, Leif Ericson, was born. Leif later became a famous Viking explorer. Eric also had two other sons and a daughter.



981-82: Eric killed two men and was forced to leave Iceland for three years. He decided to explore the land first sighted by his friend, Gunnbjörn Úlfsson, to the west of Iceland. His route took him to the island he named Greenland.



985: Eric's banishment from Iceland was over. He returned there and recruited people to sail with him to the new land he had discovered. Although the island was covered in ice, he called it Greenland to make it sound nicer and to encourage settlers to go with him.

